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**Institute for a Healthiest Maryland Announced
At Start of Childhood Obesity Summit November 15 and 16th**

Baltimore (November 15, 2011) -- Jay A. Perman, MD, President of the University of Maryland, and Joshua M. Sharfstein, MD, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH), announced today the creation of the Institute for a Healthiest Maryland, a collaboration of support systems that will guide efforts to combat chronic diseases across Maryland. The Institute's mission will focus on obesity prevention, tobacco cessation and the reduction of hypertension and high cholesterol, and will link local health departments and community leaders to proven interventions in health and wellness.

The announcement came at the opening of a two-day Summit on Childhood Obesity at the Hilton Baltimore Hotel, sponsored by the University of Maryland, Baltimore in partnership with DHMH.

"Governor O'Malley and I are committed to making Maryland the healthiest state in the nation, and by focusing on strategies for wellness and prevention, especially for children, we can improve the health of all Marylanders while simultaneously cutting costs," said Lt. Governor Anthony G. Brown, chair of Maryland's Health Quality and Cost Council. "The Institute will prove to be an essential tool for supplying our local health departments with the necessary information and resources to help young Marylanders and families in their communities adopt healthier lifestyles."

President Perman and Secretary Sharfstein will be the co-chairs of the Institute's advisory board. The Board will be supported by an executive director and will address policy, program and quality assurance needs of community partners.

"The Institute will bring energy and expertise from across the University of Maryland to bear on some of our state's toughest public health challenges," said Sharfstein. "Individuals, families, and communities across the state will benefit."

The Institute will also coordinate the "Healthiest Maryland Advocacy Network," an initiative that will support collaborations and community coalitions as they shape public policy.

"The Network is a vital component of the Institute for a Healthiest Maryland," said Frances B. Phillips, DHMH Deputy Secretary for Public Health Services. "The local coalitions will work through the Department's new State Health Improvement Process (SHIP) to affect statewide public policy changes."

The Summit on Childhood Obesity grew out of a recognition that obesity among youth is one of our nation's greatest public health concerns. Obese children frequently become obese adults, and are often destined to live with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, or high blood pressure. They are often sicker than their peers, are more susceptible to bullying and depression, and miss more school.

"Childhood obesity is a totally preventable disease if we're clever enough and motivated enough to work as a society to stop it," said Perman. But unlike the diseases Perman was trained to treat in the 1970s, which often could be fairly easily prevented or treated, childhood obesity finds its roots in behavior, the environment, disparities in access to health care, and even genetics. "The complexity of the crisis is best addressed by the interprofessional expertise at the University of Maryland, along with health and education professionals around the state."

"Childhood obesity is an epidemic in this country, with one in three children being overweight and at risk for serious diseases like diabetes," said Maryland Senator Ben Cardin. "America's children – and our nation's future – depend on strong, healthy citizens. The University of Maryland's Summit on Childhood Obesity provides an opportunity for health care and policy experts to come together to help tackle the problem of childhood obesity and promote lifelong healthiness in our nation's children."

The Summit brings together experts working to understand, prevent, and defeat childhood obesity to discuss best practices and policies and to forge professional relationships and coordination. Learn more about the Summit on Childhood Obesity at <http://obesitysummit.umaryland.edu/>.

The Institute for a Healthiest Maryland is made possible by a portion of a five-year \$9.5 million Community Transformation Grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that was awarded to DHMH in September.

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The University of Maryland is home to the Graduate School and schools of dentistry, law, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and social work and is the founding campus of the University System of Maryland.